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The CIA on campus

It sounds fictional enough. It even sounds as if it might circumvent a few disasters down the road. Listen to Robert Gates, a deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency, explaining why the CIA is seeking more advice from university scholars:

"What we are after is people who will challenge us constructively, offer us a different perspective, who will stir up the pot a bit and who will help us consider all points of view, particularly the unorthodox. Large bureaucracies like this one have difficulty promotimg imagination and creativity.

"Can you imagine," Gates continues, "what people would say if we contended that no one in the academic world has anything to offer us, that there is no information or perspective that could help us do our job? It's inconceivable that anyone would make that point."

The CIA is going to college these days to an extent not seen since the 1950s and early '60s. For perhaps 20 years they've been unwelcome there, ever since it was found the agency had infiltrated, funded and manipulated the National Student Association and had secretly used professors to write books that were used as propoganda overseas.

Now the cold relations between academia and intelligence research are thawing, and it may be a good thing. Gates notes that the CIA might have avoided the Iranian hostage fiasco if it had consulted college professors who claimed in the early '70s that the regime of the Shah of Iran was about to fall. CIA researchers thought otherwise, and look what happened.

But CIA-campus relations will be a good thing only if a simple rule is followed — if everything is kept open. There is currently a scandal at Harvard over the news that the CIA secretly contributed $45,000 to a conference on Islamic fundamentalism organized at the university by one of its professors, and that the professor also got a $107,000 grant from the agency to support research on a book.

Most arrangements seem to be above-board. Since 1982, the CIA has hosted 75 conferences a year in which its analysts met with professors and experts outside the government. Before 1982, the average was three to four such conferences a year.

Clearly, CIA officials can benefit from sounding out experts on foreign affairs, history and such international trouble spots as the Middle East. They don't have to reveal what information they make use of; they don't have to say what their final opinion is. But if they consult anyone on campus they should do so openly, and if they fund anyone to do research they should so openly, and if they interact with students they should do so openly. That seems both a smart and a fair rule to follow.